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Tibetan Women Tailors: Sewing a Community of Tibetan Women Tailors

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羊妈妈羊爸爸羊娃娃:
Sewing a Community of Tibetan Women Tailors

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the effects of a handicraft promoting company and sewing training workshop, the Shangri La Tangtong Handicraft Development Center, on the lives of its participant group of 28 women tailors. Explained is the history of the organization, justifications for formation, and description of the current workspace and products as located in Shangri La Old Town, Yunnan Province. From a series of 19 interviews (13 of which conducted with the tailors) and personal observations comes the conclusion that beyond the organization's specified goals of cultural heritage preservation and poverty alleviations, the workshop effectively provides the tailors with a strong and positive community. This community, in turn, is valuable as it gives the women tailors a means of empowerment.

Keywords: Cultural Anthropology, Ethnicity, Design and Decorative Arts

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INTRODUCTION

To describe the products sold on the streets of Lijiang, Dali, or Shangri La, words like machine-made, tourist-targeted, and replica come to mind. No matter the city, be it Kunming or Xishuangbanna, there seems to be the same sort of so-called "authentic" and "cultural" goods being sold. For this reason, artisanal handicrafts often provide a well-needed visual reprieve. They seem unique, different; this is part of their allure. They have an "apparent status as products of non-alienated labor, allowing consumers to 'singularize' them more readily than mass-produced goods" (McGuckin, 1997, p. 2). Whether real or imagined, they have story behind them, an individual, and often a cultural tradition. Because the production of handicrafts often support individual artisans and traditional techniques, there seems to be a trend of NGOs working to preserve these handicrafts. In Shangri La alone there are three organizations—the Yunnan Mountain Heritage Foundation, Thangka Center, and the Tangtong Handicraft Development Center (THDC)—supporting the production of Tibetan handicrafts as well as those of other ethnic groups.

The focus of this study is one of those three organizations—the THDC, a company and sewing-training workshop for Tibetan tailors, which will be more often referred to as the Embroidery Workshop, Dropenling, or the Shangri La Women's Tailoring Enterprise. Looking into the history and goals of the Embroidery Workshop, the paper explores the justification for the organization's formation. Then, from a series of interviews[1] and personal observations, artisan perspectives on the organization will be introduced. Ultimately, however, this paper will discuss the Embroidery Workshop's affect on the lives of the current 28 women tailors, arguing that alongside achieving

[1] 19 total interviews; 13 with tailors

goals of cultural preservation and poverty alleviation, the organization creates a community of empowered, independent women.

BEGINNINGS: TIBET POVERTY ALLEVIATION FUND

A discussion of the Shangri La Women's Tailoring Enterprise must really begin with an introduction to the Tibet Poverty Alleviation Fund (TPAF). Founded in 1998 by Arthur Holcombe, the momentum of this " non-political, non-sectarian, U.S. non-governmental organization" is directed by a mission "to improve the capabilities, livelihoods, and well-being of disadvantaged poor communities, in particular ethnic minority communities in China." More specifically, it works to provide Tibetan communities in China improved income and quality of life through "microcredit, health education, employable skills training, and other assistance" ("Poverty alleviation," p.1).

In accordance with these objectives, The Artisan Initiative (TAI) was formed in 2003. This program was built on the two-fold goal of cultural heritage preservation and poverty alleviation, aiming to improve artisans' lives by teaching handicraft skills, which could later provide income opportunities. TAI training initiatives included:

> *1) Providing technical production skills training to improve the design, quality, and market appeal of their products.*
> *2) Training artisans to better understand evolving market tastes and market trends.*
> *3) Expanding markets and providing marketing support for artisans to sell their products locally, regionally, and internationally*. ("The artisan initiative," p.1)

The first branch of The Artisan Initiative was a Lhasa-based company and training workshop named the Dropenling Handicraft Development Center. The word "Dropenling" translates from Tibetan as "giving back for the betterment of all sentient beings." This theme falls in line with the organization's goal of selling products that

"directly support Tibetan artisans and their families" by preserving and perpetuating Tibetan culture ("Product catalog," 2013, p.1).

Each year, Dropenling provides two training workshops in various handicrafts, such as sewing, weaving, natural dyeing, leather working, and woodworking. From these workshops artisans gain technical skills, as well as learn how to create Dropenling designed products, which are aimed at bridging traditional crafts and modern markets. The aim is to create products that are still Tibetan, yet contemporary. Various experts have been brought in to teach handicrafts, such as doll and toy making by Susie Vickery (a professional costume designer based in London and Mumbai) or shawl and scarf weaving by Liz Williamson, an Australian weaver (Burkert & Gleason, 2008, p.3). After each workshop, the artisans are given a number of orders. They then buy the necessary fabric and materials from the Dropenling storeroom and work on the products at home. Upon completion, the products are brought to the Dropenling store to be sold and the tailors are paid according to time[2] and material costs.

TAI justified the need for such a program citing the challenges many Tibetan artisans face in competing with a current Tibetan handicraft market dominated by imports (Burkert & Gleason, p.1). In the early 2000s, for example, when this project was forming, the United Nations Development Program estimated that 70 percent of handicraft products sold in Tibet were imported from Nepal, India, or other parts of China. Tibetans, on the other hand, only managed "13 percent of local handicraft enterprises" ("Tibet Development," p. 6). Furthermore, in his 2002 statement at the Congressional-Executive Commission on China, Mr. Holcombe[3] cited "growing evidence of Han enterprises…squeezing out Tibetan enterprises even in traditional

[2] To estimate the amount of time that should be spent per product, Ms. Vickery times herself sewing a model of the product. First, the price paid to the tailors is determined and then increased 100% to be sold in the shop.

[3] President of the Tibet Poverty Alleviation Fund

product areas." While there were approximately "340 officially registered Han enterprises in the 'handicraft' sector," only 28 Tibetan enterprises were registered (Holcombe, 2002, p.2).

Mr. Gyalpo, a current product design specialist (PDS) in Lhasa, expanded on the need for such an organization focused on artisan development. Many of the artisans, he explained, come from remote areas and have limited educational backgrounds. Therefore, while many have the technical skills to create their products, often they lack the business or marketing skills necessary to compete with larger handicraft producers. Furthermore, he stated, most artisans "only knew how to think inside the box," not able to look beyond the traditional crafts they had learned. Dropenling workshops not only train artisans in developing handicraft skills, but also in basic business and market trends. Therefore, artisans learn to consider "buyer tastes and quality expectations, and develop new designs with traditional motifs that appeal to foreign and domestic markets" ("The artisan initiative," p. 1). Most importantly, Gyalpo insisted, is that the artisans have gained a different perspective, a way of thinking beyond their traditions and local markets (Gyalpo, personal communication, November 5, 2013).

After the Lhasa riots in 2008, however, tourism decreased and Dropenling effectively turned into an export company overnight[4] (Burkert & Vickery, personal communication, November 12, 2013). Due to tightening controls and in country tensions, the project was relocated in 2009 to Shangri La County, Yunnan Province in the form of a sewing workshop. Thus, the Artisan Initiative project became its current day incarnation of two companies: one Lhasa-based, called Lhasa Villages and one in Shangri La named the Tangtong Handicraft Development Center (THDC).[5] Both

[4] Most exports are sent to the U.S.

[5] For clarification, a recap and summary of names: The Tibet Poverty Alleviation Fund, a U.S. NGO created a project called The Artisan Initiative (TAI). TAI established a store and training workshop in

companies—while aided by the expertise of master teachers and workshop leaders, Susie Vickery and Claire Burkert—are now run by local managers and product development staff.

BRANCHING OUT: ZHONGDIAN

Located approximately 1,608 kilometers from Lhasa at an altitude around 3,300 meters sits Shangri La (or Zhongdian, formerly known as Gyalthang). It is situated in Diqing Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture's Shangri La County, lying to the east of Deqin and Weixi Lisu Autonomous Counties. As of a 2000 census, the Tibetan population of Diqing was approximately 33 percent. Much of Diqing has a rural population, whose livelihoods depend on farming, animal husbandry, and collection of medicinal herbs. After the opening of the region in 1997, however, tourism also became a lucrative source of income (Hillman, 2003, p.546-547).

Targeting the Tibetan population of Deqin and Shangri La counties, the Shangri La Tangtong Handicraft Development Center (THDC) established a sewing training workshop in 2009. While in Lhasa the goal had been to preserve cultural handicrafts, it seemed that in Shangri La, the goal was more to revive this cultural heritage (Burkert & Vickery, personal communication, November 12, 2013). Furthermore, the Shangri La workshop placed a stronger emphasis on hand stitching and producing more contemporary products such as "toys and puppets, ornaments and jackets." In this first year, "half of the participants were professional tailors with their own businesses and half were women who had free time from agricultural activities and were interested in sewing" (Burkert, 2012, p.1).

Lhasa named the Dropenling Handicraft Center, later renamed Lhasa Villages. TAI then established a second store and workshop in Shangri La, Yunnan Province. While officially named the Shangri-la Tangtong Handicraft Development Center, it is informally called the Embroidery Workshop, and more recently dubbed the Shangri La Women's Tailoring Enterprise. Products from both Lhasa and Yunnan companies are branded as Dropenling merchandise.

Initially, product design specialist Claire Burkert and local product design staff (PDS) visited villages in the area and selected tailors to participate. The women from Deqin, specifically, were "chosen as they traditionally embroider aprons that they wear at the back of their clothing" (Burkert, 2012, p.1). Y.N.[6], a master tailor who has worked with Dropenling for the past five years, for example, remembers the day Claire came to her village. That day many people had been wearing aprons covered in traditional embroidery (Appendix A). Intrigued, Claire and PDS staff went from villager to villager asking about the apron cloth until they found the source: Y.N (Y.N., personal communication, November 9, 2013).

In its current state, the organization numbers 43 active tailors, aged 25 to late 60s, with a majority coming from Shangri La, Deqin, and Wujin. Rather being chosen from their respective villages, however, new tailors are now referred to the workshop by family and friends. Three current tailors are sisters, two tailors are relatives, and two other tailors are in-laws. A few of tailors also had cousins who had worked as translators, while others had learned about the enterprise just by living near Shangri La.

EMBROIDERY WORKSHOP

Place

While in previous years the Embroidery Workshop was located at Songzanlin monastery or the upstairs room of Dropenling's shop, the 2013 winter reincarnation of the workshop was tucked away in a small alley of old town Shangri La. It was so hidden, in fact, that tourists and local residents alike were unaware of its existence. From the outside, the only distinguishing features of the wooden, two-story building was a faded red metal door and a sign that above papered windows inexplicably read

[6] Due to lack of official consent, tailors' names will be substituted with appropriate initials.

"Jetty 33." The first floor was divided into two rooms, accessible by separate doors leading from the outside. Located closest to the alley was the storeroom. Corner to corner, the room was filled with necessary materials sourced from Kunming or Beijing—bags of cotton, rolls of felted wool, boxes of thread—as well as housing some miscellaneous items like an old-fashioned "Made in the People's Republic of China" sewing machine seemingly long laid to rest.

The adjoining room, with an upper wall of windows and skylight, was the workshop itself. A large wooden table dominated the space of the first floor. With fabric stowed beneath, the rectangular wooden countertop served as a spacious, flat surface for drawing and cutting vinyl patterns and fabric. Up the right wall extended a staircase leading to the open, indoor balcony of the second floor. The hum of the machines, the murmur of conversation, and the cacophony of laughter: here could be heard the orchestra of the workshop's daily sounds.

At the head of the stairs, was a desk shared by the workshop's two central figures—teachers and designers, Susie Vickery and Claire Burkert. This desk served as the operational center of the workshop where organizational decisions were made, meetings were conducted, color combinations were determined, and product quality was confirmed. The rest of the second floor was divided into three rooms housing fourteen sewing machines and 28 tailors spread out according to machine availability and assigned group. First, the tailors were divided into groups of hand sewers (7 tailors) and machine sewers (21 tailors).[7] Next, the machine sewers were further subdivided into eight smaller groups relegated to learning specific products. Within each group was

[7] Hand sewers create products that do not require machine-sewing skills, such as berets, coin purses, eyeglass cases, stockings, and ornaments; whereas, the machine sewers create products that integrate both machine and hand sewing skills.

one experienced tailor responsible for teaching and supervising the work of one to three newer tailors[8].

This system of organization was implemented in 2012 under the initiative of developing a group of tailors "invited to work as lead trainers along with THDC Product Development Staff, Susie Vickery, or Claire Burkert." With their exemplary skills and experience—having already "participated in 3-4 trainings" –these chosen tailors would take part in Susie's three-week training workshops on teaching and quality checking new products. "The most talented and experienced" of tailors would be designated as "Masters." Each teacher workshop is immediately followed by a four-week training workshop for new and less experienced tailors. This year's teacher workshop ran from October 18th through November 3rd, yielding five teachers, four master tailors, and one master in charge of general supervision. (Burkert, 2012, p. 2)

Time

The 2013 winter sewing training workshop ran from November 4th through November 30th. At the beginning, morning work hours spanned from 9AM to 12:30PM, followed by an afternoon session from 2:00PM to 6:00PM every day, Sunday through Monday. Later, however, in accordance with the winter weather, the workshop hours were shortened: with a later beginning at 9:30AM, an earlier conclusion at 5:30PM, and the occasional Sunday half day. During the break periods, breakfast, lunch, and dinner were provided at the tailors' hotel.

The tailors' actual work hours, however, were not limited to the parameters of their official workday. Many tailors resumed their work before 2:00PM in the workshop space or outside the hotel in the afternoon sun. As I interviewed one tailor during her lunchtime break, she continued to hand sew festival horse finger puppets.

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[8] The exception being C.L.: being the Master tailor of the hand-sewing group, she supervised the work of six other tailors.

During the workshop, she explained, the tailors learned to make new products. In their free time, however, the tailors would continue to sew previous orders. Many nights, A.Y. said, she might stay awake until midnight working (A, personal communication, November 12, 2013).

The tailors—Claire and Susie[9] often commented—were very seldom late and, if they were, remained very conscious of it. "迟到了！迟到咯！对不起老师,"[10] they would chime with sheepish grins. Time, it seems, was very important for the tailors. There were no clocks on the workshop walls, nor did the tailors set alarms on the cell phones. Time was marked by the ringing of voices rather than the chiming of clocks. Each temporal checkpoint was accompanied by a complementary exclamation: "上班了!" "吃饭啦吃饭啦!" "扫地咯!" "下班了!" "加班咯!"[11]

Products

Even though handicraft products—in comparison to machine-made products—leave more room for variability, Susie and Claire worked to ensure Dropenling's products had the highest quality and consistency, even in the finest of details. This was achieved by setting a system of production and expectations. First, Susie and Claire would design the products—Susie making the master patterns, which were used to translate the designs into three-dimensional form. Next, Susie would teach the master and teacher tailors to make the new products, which those experienced tailors would in turn teach the new tailors. To promote consistency, a list of methods was written out in English for reference and tailors were encouraged to check each step of the sewing process with Susie or Claire. For example, before sewing a sheep mother toy's legs,

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[9] While perhaps not the most academic, Ms. Burkert and Ms. Vickery will be addressed by their first names as they served as mentors and friends. I use their names with the utmost respect.
[10] "I'm late, I'm late! Sorry, teacher."
[11] "Go to work!" "Eat! Eat!" "Sweep the floor!" "Get off work!" "Work overtime!"

Susie would check the size of the fabric against the pattern. After sewing on baby sheep's ears, the tailor would have Susie check the position of the ears against a master copy. This method of systematic alterations was used to ensure increased efficiency by correcting small mistakes at each checkpoint rather than making extremes changes at the endpoint. The tailors were instructed to make two successful products—one which would become an office copy and one the tailors took home as their personal sample—approved by Susie or Claire before learning the next product.

Products made at the workshop included toys, puppets, skirts, coin purses, and stockings. While marketed as serving to "preserve and perpetuate Tibetan culture;" the tailors often struggled to name what Tibetan characteristics the products actually had ("Product Catalog," 2013, p. 1). "应该是，但说不清楚,"[12] they would more often reply (Z, personal communication, November 14, 2013). Burkert explains "folk art specialists" also question the "Tibetan-ness" of the products, as they are "designed by foreigners, with a function not traditional to Tibetans, and produced by women (and some men) who only recently could be called artisans." However, it is important to note that these products are described as "culture-based products for new markets," thus they are inspired by and evoke elements of Tibetan culture, yet are not bound to traditional limitations (Burkert, 2010, p. 1, 10).

Inspiration is drawn from religion, costume, and cultural symbolism. From books such as "The Art of Tibetan Decoration" come the cloud designs on cushion covers (Appendix B), whereas images embroidered on coin purses come from the eight auspicious symbols in Tibetan Buddhism.[13] There are ornaments and stockings modeled after Tibetan boots, while sheep mother toys are decorated with embroidered

[12] "There should be, but I can't clearly say."
[13] Such as the lotus flower, conch shell, or endless knot.

replicas of *shermas* (Appendix C) ("Product catalog," 2013, p. 28).[14] In addition, the sheep father toys are adorned with *chubas*—a "traditional Tibetan gown…with long sleeves and two flaps in the front that are folded on top of one another and fastened tightly with a long colorful strip of fabric around the hips" (Appendix C) (Bassini, 2012, p. 93). From Tibetan monastery wall paintings come designs for snow lion and tiger toys--the snow lion products earning a UNESCO Award of Excellence in 2010 (Appendix D). Symbolically, snow lions are especially characteristic of Tibet, serving as Tibet's national emblem and featured in "the center of the national flag of the Tibetan exile community" (Schrempf, 2002, p. 160). Lastly, the majority of products made in the 2013 winter workshop center around the theme of sheep. Sheep skirts, toys, purses, iPad cases, and even families of sheep mothers, fathers, and babies were created not from some sort of sheep fetish, but rather in preparation for the 2015 year of the sheep (Appendix E).

METHODS

Throughout the month of November I interviewed a total of nineteen people related to the Shangri La Women's Tailoring Enterprise, thirteen of those interviews being with tailors. While some interviews were more unplanned and more conversational, the majority of tailor interviews were structured around a few key questions created by Claire or myself. Half of the interviews served not only as a part of this paper, but also as tailors' background stories to be used on the company website for marketing and informative purposes.

Throughout the interviewing process, the greatest obstacle was neither time nor resources, but language. In many situations, differences of accent or dialect hindered

[14] *Shermas* are traditional Tibetan aprons made of "narrow panels of colorful hand woven wool cloth," naturally dyed then "held to a flame to burn away loose fibers" ("Product Catalog," 2013, p. 28).

comprehension (on both sides of the interviewer and interviewee) and the lack of linguistic fluidity could make formal interviews feel too stilted. For two interviews, it was necessary to speak through translator as the tailors in question only spoke Tibetan. The issue with having an intermediary, however, is that the interviewee often looked to the translator for their answers or, in some cases, even let the translator take over. In a more humorous example, one tailor preferred to put a mischievous spin on her friend's interview:

"What is most important to tell your students?" I asked. Our Chinese dialects not in line, the interviewee H.G. looked to her friend, C.L. "Make the products well," C.L. replied. More confident of the question topic, H.G. chirped in, "study hard while you're here," only to have her comment overridden by her C.L.'s jokingly authoritative follow-up: "Don't miss your husband!"

"*Do* you miss your husband?" I asked. "No. There's no time!" H.G. replied. Then, without missing a beat, her friend laughingly added, "During the day she doesn't miss her husband. But at night…" (H, personal communication, November 15, 2013)

Furthermore, the word choice of the questions often seemed to regulate and limit the interviewees' answers. If in trying to gain a glimpse into the subjects' personal lives, I asked, "Do you have kids?" Before subsequent prompting, the response might only yield a brief "yes" rather than an account of the children's ages, genders, or explanation of other family members. Therefore, it was necessary to alter certain questions. For example, "Do you have kids?" became: "Please introduce your family."

Most of my information, however, was gathered through daily observation of the workshop. I spent five to seven days per week at the workshop, having casual conversations, watching the progression of product creation, drawing and cutting patterns, and eating meals with the tailors. Through the weeks, I gradually transitioned

from outsider interviewer to resident pattern cutter with over ten completed patterns to my name. While interviews were important, as they facilitated learning more about the organization and certain aspects of the tailors' individual lives, simple observation and participation proved more helpful in discovering personalities, group dynamics, and a sense of the community.

ARTISAN PERSPECTIVES

Before Dropenling

A.Y.'s home had always been the farm. She never went to school and spent her childhood helping her family raise cows, pigs, and sheep (A, personal communication, November 12, 2013). A majority of tailors working at Dropenling live in Shangri La or rural regions of Wujin and Deqin. Coming from a rural background means that before their current position, many had never had what they considered a job; instead, their days were spent farming or doing housework. The word that was often used to describe their lives was "干活" meaning "manual labor."

Some tailors, like J.D. or D.Y., also earned money by collecting herbs, which could be sold as traditional Tibetan medicine (J, personal communication, November 25, 2013). Furthermore, while most tailors had basic sewing skills, only three of the thirteen I interviewed had previous handicraft experience. C.L.'s brother-in-law, for example, used to own a small town leather factory in Deqin. As a result, C.L. spent many years making Tibetan sheep leather purses, which men would traditionally wear during the new years (C, personal communication, November 10, 2013). Another tailor had been making traditional Tibetan carpets, rugs, and embroideries—crafts she had learned from her mother—since she was 18 (Y.N., personal conversation, November 9, 2013). Lastly, a third tailor was an experienced designer of woven bags, placemats, and

scarfs, which she sold at the nearby Yunnan Mountain Heritage Foundation's Handicraft Center (Y.D., personal communication, November 10, 2013). No matter their personal or work background, however, the tailors were overwhelmingly bound by one quality: they were—every single one—mothers.[15]

Joining Dropenling

When I asked the tailors how they felt when they first arrived at Dropenling, the general response was that the work was difficult. D.Y., an experienced teacher tailor, confided in the beginning, she did not know how to use the machines, hand-sew, or even properly make the products. Work was stressful and she did not like that (D, personal communication, November 9, 2013). Even C.L., a master tailor who has worked with Dropenling for the past five years, explained her beginning insecurities. "When I first started working, I was a little worried," she said, "I wasn't sure if I would be able to work here for a long time. Now [after five years] I'm relaxed" (C, personal communication, November 10, 2013). D.Y. expressed this trend as well: despite the beginning difficulties, as she worked more, practiced more, and learned more, she gained more confidence and the desire to continue learning (D, personal communication, November 9, 2013). The emotions of new tailors, like H.Y., often mirrored these insecurities: "再缝再缝。我不会！不会！学不会,"[16] she said with a half smile as she shook her head discouragingly in my direction (H.Y., personal communication, November 11, 2013).

Perspectives on Education

There was a similar feeling of discouragement when some of the tailors talked of their education. When we spoke, often came the rueful comment, "I can't speak 普通

[15] Or as they liked to call themselves: 羊妈妈的妈妈 (Sheep mothers' mothers).
[16] "Sew again, re-sew. I can't! I can't! I can't learn."

话."[17] One tailor had just moved to Shangri La from Deqin so it would be easier for her kids to go to school. She was very proud of them, as they could gain an education she never had: "I never went to school. I can't read or write, can't speak Tibetan, and can't even *Putonghua*!" (J, personal communication, November 25, 2013). Lack of education for them meant a lack of opportunities. When I asked one tailor, "If you were the boss, what would you change about this organization?" she replied: "I can't read or write. I can't be the boss" (T, personal communication, November 21, 2013).

Even though many of these women never had an education, the recent implementation of the master-teacher-tailor system, allowed them to take on the role of teacher. While becoming a teacher was a great source of pride, the tailors were also well aware of the responsibility they held. Teaching, D.Y. explained, can be "stressful and difficult. We want to teach our students as well as we can and have them learn what we have learned" (D, personal communication, November 9, 2013). C.L. echoed this opinion, expressing that she wanted to teach her students effectively: "they can call my phone, come to my home—no matter what, if they don't understand, they can always ask me" (C, personal communication, November 10, 2013). That a student wouldn't be able to learn seemed to be the teachers' greatest concern. When teaching, A.Y. stated, "you need a method: you have to tell them how to cut the patterns, how to do things. And if they have trouble learning, I would tell them once, twice, as many times more how to do it" (A, personal communication, November 12, 2013). Another tailor joked, "If the students can't do it, I'll just go home!" (T, personal communication, November 21, 2013). Furthermore, even tailors without the official role of teacher effectively served as one. In this work, everyone was a teacher; everyone was a student.

[17] *Putonghua*: spoken Chinese with standard pronunciation.

Goals

Asking the tailors what their goals were working at Dropenling, the responses tended towards improving skills and learning new products, so that ultimately they could earn more money. The money the tailors would earn was important, "because it can help us send or children to school, improve our lives, and help us make even more products. We want to continue learning how to make more products that we can teach others" (D, personal communication, November 9, 2013). Another tailor cited her desire to work so that she could help her kids and husband. A third laughingly commented her favorite product to make was the coin purse. "Most things are about money, aren't they?" she said, "It's not that we do everything for money. But jobs, everyone works for money, don't they? Our work is very difficult; we work very hard" (Y.J., personal communication, November 10, 2013). Even though the tailors expressed there had been an increase in their income since starting work with Dropenling, the response to "as the boss, what would you change about the company?" was still indisputably "raise the tailors' salaries!"

The tailors also emphasized the long lasting opportunities of learning sewing skills. "Our sewing," one tailor explained, "can be done at the workshop or home. As we get older, this will be a good, convenient job for us" (D, personal communication, November 9, 2013). "In the future," another tailor said, "I will continue to do this work. When it rains, when it's nighttime, it is work you can always do. Only when I'm so old I can't see will I have to stop" (A, personal communication, November 12, 2013). Alongside many tailors' verbal affirmations that they would continue working at the workshop, thirteen tailors made a financial investment of 1,650 RMB in their sewing future by buying new sewing machines to continue their handiwork at home.

The 29th Tailor: Perspectives of the Odd Man Out

With an overwhelming majority of women tailors, both in Shangri La and Lhasa, the organization emphasizes the creation of a strong, cohesive, empowered, independent group of women. Above its poster of members, the Shangri La group, itself, was defined in permanent marker as a "Women's Tailoring Enterprise." A women's enterprise, it undeniably is, but that is not to say there is not room for men. Amongst the 28 current tailors, numbers a single man tailor, dubbed by Susie and Claire as "the Man from Lhasa." At first known for his mysterious tendency to come and go as he pleased, he soon became an integral part of the tailoring community. "*Awoo*! Older brother!" the women tailors would catcall. When his picture was missing from the aforementioned poster, it did not go unnoticed. "He wasn't there!" one woman asserted. "Yes, he was!" another chimed. "No, not in the end," came the conceding response, before turning to the man challenging, "Who made you run away?"

Throughout the workshop, despite his being odd man out, the Man from Lhasa consistently expressed his enthusiasm for handicrafts and approval of the sewing training program. Now working as a driver and occasional teacher, the Man from Lhasa had spent much of his youth making the art of cross-stitching. Learning sewing techniques, he said, is important because it is something one can do in one's free time. "If you have nothing to do, it's not good for you. If you have work, your mind will be healthy and your body will be healthy. You can earn a bit of money and each year will be better than the last" (Man, personal communication, November 11, 2013).

COMMUNITY

The question remains: how exactly does Dropenling's Embroidery Workshop affect the lives of Tibetan artisans? It could be argued that the products promote

cultural preservation through their use of traditional Tibetan-inspired clothes, symbolism, or motifs. It is also indisputable that the handicraft skills the workshop provides the tailors with increased opportunities to supplement their income—not only by filling Dropenling's orders, but also by designing their own products. However, from four weeks of observation, it was apparent that the Embroidery Workshop had achieved something more than TAI's official goals of cultural preservation and poverty alleviation: it had created a community.

Looking at the demographics of the tailor group, it is not surprising a strong community was formed. This group of 28 comes from similar backgrounds, similar areas, similar life experiences, and now, additionally, shares the same work and learning experience. They are all women and mothers and from these similarities, as well as from the consistent amount of time they spend together—eating, working, and sleeping seven days a week together—comes a sense of solidarity. One morning, for example, when I sat with the tailors for breakfast, conversation switched to the topic of age. "How old are you?" they asked one another. With each response, there was a chorus of protests, "No! You can't be. You look much younger. Even younger than me!" Whether it was during the lunch break when three tailors helped H.G. sew her sheep hooves or the morning the tailors gathered around the breakfast table affirming each others' youth, every moment was dedicated to supporting one another.

A Support System

This system of support has been further aided by the implementation of the master-teacher-student system. Not only does it give experienced tailors with a sense of accomplishment, but also a responsibility to their fellow tailors. In turn, it provides new tailors with a personal mentor who has gone through the same experience. When H.Y. was questioning her ability to sew, for example, she could turn to her teacher or fellow

students—a personal support group tailored to her and the products she was creating. Furthermore, new tailors are generally placed within groups of tailors, which are relatives, from their village, or friends that referred them to the workshop so that they feel at home as early as possible.

The community of current and previous tailors—in total they number 43 active tailors—was affirmed and promoted by the November 13th Event. The first of its kind at the Embroidery Workshop, this event was a "celebration of the women's tailoring enterprise that started in 2009, five years ago."[18] The day was spent laughing, singing, eating, dancing, and running about Shangri La old town in traditional dress taking pictures of the tailors and their products (Appendix F). The goal was to further a sense of belonging and camaraderie among the tailors, as well as celebrate their achievements. At the event, the tailors were given the option to sign a Dropenling membership form. "We want you to consider yourselves a family," Burkert told the tailors, "to help you build your group and one way is to call every one of you a member, like members of a family. And so, if you want to continue to be members of this women's enterprise, this family, we ask you to sign in with the Product Development Staff." Membership means the tailor "agrees to receive and deliver orders, to follow samples, and to come to meetings and trainings when possible…[it] is a sign that [they] commit to this work and…wish to be a part of the family" (Burkert, 2013). This theme of family was even mirrored by the products the tailors were sewing: a sheep mother, a sheep father, and a sheep baby, what were they creating but a family of sheep?

From a strong support system comes a feeling comfort: for these women, I would argue, the workshop represents a safe space. It is a place recommended to the tailors by friends and is a space open to family (Appendix G). On the weekends, the

[18] In the spirit of celebration, we spent the day shouting "happy birthday!" to one another.

tailors' children often visit; the workshop being a convenient meeting place as it is can be closer to the children's school than the tailors' homes. Furthermore, whether one is an experienced tailor or has never sewn before, the tailors are an incredibly inclusive group. Walking once with three tailors from Wujin, I asked, "Are you three best friends?" One tailor looked at me and replied, "Yeah, we are. But we can be four best friends now… Whether we're from Wujin or elsewhere, it doesn't matter: we're all friends here. " The craft of sewing, moreover, lends itself to maintaining personal relationships. As Y.J. said, she prefers hand sewing because she can bring it to her friends' houses to work on. "Anyhow," she laughed, "you can't put a sewing machine on your back and bring it to your friend's!" (Y.J., personal communication, November 10, 2013).

Furthermore, bringing together a group of women can create a special environment. One tailor explained she liked being part of this group, "because we can express our true feelings, which might be awkward to say around men" (A, personal communication, November 12, 2013). The level of comfort the women felt amongst each other can be confirmed by the amount of ridiculousness that took place. When one day, for example, a tailor's scarf-skirt came undone, the was no embarrassment, but a trill of laughter as another tailor yelled: "你的屁股去来了!"[19] In the case of the tailors, it would not be unfounded to say that comfort yields naughtiness. One tailor, known for her whistle and her smile, spent many a day stuffing her bosom with an assortment of materials from cotton to fabric to—on that very special November 13th—rice bowls (Appendix H). Another tailor followed her lead and took a break one afternoon to stuff her stomach with cotton until it appeared she was pregnant. Later, the aforementioned bosom-stuffing tailor became infamous for her pulling out unfinished products during

[19] Approximately: "Your butt has emerged!!" Or perhaps a better translation: "Your butt is showing!"

lunchtime and pretending they were penises. In the end, for all its silliness, their laughter only served to further strengthen the bonds of friendship and community.

Breaking Language Barriers

I would like to note the exceptionality of this community created despite distinct language barriers. As one teacher tailor commented, the hardest part about teaching was often that many of the tailors speak different dialects (T.D., personal communication, November 21, 2013). For that matter, not only were there different dialects, but also three different languages spoken: Mandarin, Tibetan, and English. While there were translators, there was also many times where other methods of communication were used. Sometimes, it was Susie's use of sound words—like "zhwooop!" for the sound of sewing thread. Other times, there would be words created from a fusion of Chinese and English。 样品, *yangpin*, was translated into English as "yumpy!" Meanwhile, the tailors would mimic Susie's warmhearted affirmations of "beautiful!" as a high-pitched "pootiful!!" Or, if Claire talked to the tailors directly in English, the tailors would reply in Chinese with each somehow still managing to be understood. Lastly, even without a common language, it was still apparent who the loud, gregarious ones were and the quiet, shy ones were; who the mischievous were and the caring ones. Personality shone through.

EMPOWERMENT

I would like to propose, therefore, that the most tangible effect from working at Dropenling's workshop is the creation and belonging to a strong, positive community. That is not to say working with Dropenling does not affect the tailors income or quality of life—it is a job and money unquestionably is the reason for working. Because I spent my research period within in the workshop, rather than visiting the tailors' homes, and

because I do not know specific details of the tailors' economic backgrounds, I do not feel at liberty to make arguments on economics. I was able, however, to witness, to feel, and to participate first-hand in the formation of community.

While I will not explicate on the economic benefits of this work, I can, however, comment on the worth of the community. Why is it important? Why should one take note? The existence of this women's tailoring community is valuable, because it creates a culture of empowerment. The master-teacher-tailor organization fosters responsibility and leadership, as well as a reward system for experience and hard work. It is a source of pride and self-worth and allows the tailors to be part of an educational system so many of them were denied in their youth. As they gain more experience, the tailors are further encouraged to take on more responsibilities. Y. N., for example, the group's general supervisor, was in charge of leading the sheep mother quality check, going through the expectations of each inch of fabric and thread. Furthermore, at the end of the workshop session, three tailors were asked whether they would like to become local quality checkers for their respective regions, as well as taking on the responsibility of collecting and transporting all of the tailors' products. This would increase those tailors' salary and leadership, while saving other tailors time and money. The workshop not only provides the tailors with sewing skills, but also provides them with skills to be economically independent, to have the means and confidence to support themselves and their families. These women, these tailors, these mothers are thus empowered.[20]

[20] Literally, as well, they are strong. Each year the women tailors uphold a tradition of throwing any men at the Embroidery Workshop up and down. When I asked the man tailor why the women threw him up and down, he replied: "I have no idea." When I asked a woman tailor, she shrugged, "He's the only man."

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: *Yandron's Apron*

APPENDIX B: *Cloud Design*

(阿旺, 1999, p. 7)

("Product Catalog," 2013, p. 26)

APPENDIX C: *Traditional Clothing*

APPENDIX D: *Snow Lion*

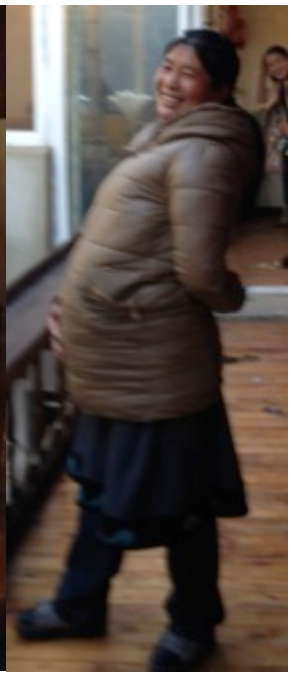
("Product Catalog," 2013, p. 9)

APPENDIX E: *Sheep Abound!*

APPENDIX F: *November 13 Event*

APPENDIX G: *Family Visit*

APPENDIX H: *Some Extra Fabric*



APPENDIX I: Future ISP Suggestions

- Continued study of the life of a modern Tibetan tailor
- A creative project learning how to sew products along with the new tailors
- The effects of other artisan promoting NGOs in the area, such as the Yunnan Mountain Heritage Foundation
- The trend of handicraft preserving NGOs and its implications
- The role of Tibetan women in Shangri La's society